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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Commemorative Pottery

By

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Introduction

The clay forms for my thesis commemorate personal experiences, dreams, memories, and fantasies. I view my work as capturing a moment of something familiar; a reminder of ordinary events that might have gone unnoticed. The unity of imagery, surface and form is the major investigation for my thesis. Drawing from autobiographical themes and searching for an equilibrium between figure and vessel are the criteria from which I work. I also explore the process of transformation of my images from two dimensional figures to their full three dimensional expression.

Chapter I Imagery

My source material is drawn from personal experiences and specific moments in time. It is these moments that generate my ideas. In the Arts of some cultures where ritual and tradition are sources of inspiration, their imagery is not personally oriented. Day to day events are explained through myths, gods, or some type of religious iconography. An example of this is in Precolumbian Peruvian culture where cats are worshipped. As a result, feline imagery became prevalent throughout their ceramics.

Canine imagery is prevalent in my ceramics although not for religious reasons. My pots attempt to freeze a moment, perhaps a time where detail may go unnoticed. I am calling to memory the sensitive specifics that exist within these moments. The way my dog looks at me when he longs to go out, to eat or to have his belly rubbed are several gestures that I have chosen to work with. There is something universal about the look a dog gives you. It is this special communication, that exists only in a very short pocket of time, which I strive to capture. According to Jung; "Many primitives assume that man has a 'bush soul' as well as his own, and that his bush soul is incarnate in a wild animal or a tree with which the human individual has some kind of psychic identity."¹

It is this unconscious identity from which much of my sources are drawn. My intention is not to make an object that imitates these gestures but to create a pot as a commemorative to these moments, as a tangible reminder.

American folk artists commemorate everyday events in this manner.

"Some find inspiration in recent events; others in memories of times past. Most often the memories are of happy occasions or of every day events which have acquired a patina of ease and pleasure."²

"In viewing folk artists as chroniclers it becomes apparent that, since their painting or carving often serves as an escape from an unfulfilling reality, they are highly selective in what they choose to record."³

I, too, in a sense create my own reality through my work.

I feel an affinity with the crude and direct, somewhat child-like style characteristic of folk art. The quality I am most drawn to is the emphasis on "detailed pattern rather than on accurate form."⁴

Chapter II Form

These commemorative pieces take the form of wheel-thrown and slab-rolled constructions. They are a three-dimensional realization of earlier drawings.

I work from what is familiar; the cut-out stenciled figures from my drawings become cut-out slabs of clay or negative spaces in the pot. The body of these figurative constructions is a wheel-thrown pot.

There is a tradition of earthenware forms which I allude to in my work. It has to do with a generous use of materials, thick, almost crude forms. Examples of this can be found in Precolumbian pottery (see Plate I) as well as 17th century English slipware Toft platters (see Plate II).

These pieces are an investigation of the balance between the vessel and the figure. What I look at is the thickness of the bowl in relationship to size, the thickness of slabs, the size and weight of added appendages and how much bowl I could cut away and still have it read "bowl".

To make these pots be both figure and vessel equally is a very delicate balance of the proportions. It is almost by accident when the pot appears to be an equal balance between figure and vessel, and sometimes the piece is more successful when these proportions are not exactly balanced.

Many cultures through history have incorporated this concept of the marriage of a vessel and figure into their vocabulary of pottery forms. The pottery that I look at is Precolumbian from South America (see Plate I), Neolithic Chinese, and bird pitchers from Crete (see

Plate III). More contemporary sources are British pots by the Martin Brothers (see Plate IV) and ceramics by Picasso (see Plate V).

I want my pots to look as though they are about to move. Some of the contributing factors are that most of the pots are oval, manipulated on the wheel; an oval is more active than a circle. The work also has a diagonal orientation; if it were horizontal it would appear at rest.

Chapter III Surface

My pre-thesis concerns dealt primarily with surface decoration. The form of my pots had strong ties to an earthenware tradition of the past but had little relationship to how they were decorated.

At this point I was looking at the pottery of the Mimbres Indians as a resource (see Plate VI). The Mimbres used a number of decorative systems consistently on a shallow bowl format. I responded to the depth and complexity of the surface. From this I started to see the potential of decoration as structure.

Through the Mimbres pottery I could see how decoration can alter the vessel form visually, how illusionistic space could be utilized and how two-dimensional form can allude to three-dimensional structure.

Another source during this period was 17th century Toft commemorative platters (see Plate I). Many lead-glazed earthenware pots of this time were characterized by the boldness of child-like figurative drawings on crude forms. The decoration is slip-trailed in a generous, thick, cake-decorating manner. Here I responded to the commemorative aspect of the platters, to the use of writing on the rims, to the use of materials and the drawing style.

I discovered a decorative technique using cut-out stencils with slip on "Inn Signs" dish which was easily adopted to my own drawing style (see Plate VIII). My drawing is flat in nature.

For my thesis I made a series of clay forms. They were in fact three-dimensional realizations of my paintings. The following is a listing of the different concepts I explored in decorating these clay

forms:

(1) To tell a narrative using painted figures on a zoomorphic pot. This in many ways is similar to my pre-thesis concerns. The importance is the painting. The form of the vessel is only to restate part of the story. Examples of this can be found in Precolumbian pottery. Another example is the Egyptian Faience Hippopotamus, 1950 B.C. Here the hippo is blue and covered with lotus leaves to tell about where the animal lives.

(2) To decorate the dog-form as a dog using pattern to integrate surface and form. The triangle is a restatement of the triangles found in the dog-form. According to Rawson; "In the most thoroughly successful ceramics the surface ornaments may be related to the form of their pot not only through proportion and rhythm - important though these are - but through actual formal echoes."⁵

(3) To create a 2D/3D ambiguity. I discriminately used pattern or lack of pattern to define body parts. Sometimes restating a physical slab with pattern to represent a body part, while other times creating structure using only color and pattern, allowing the surface decoration to define the form.

Until this point I was doing all surface work on leatherhard clay with commercial slips. I layered colors using stencils to create patterns, narratives or solid areas of color. This was no longer satisfactory because of the drying problem involved with doing constructed pieces. I was adding too much water with the slips back into the piece as it dried, causing cracking and stress. Also, the wet newspaper I used for stencils adheres best when the clay is barely leatherhard. I needed an alternative process for decoration.

The following is a description of alternatives I tried, why I chose them, the processes involved, and the results.

(1) Sawdust Firing

I attempted sawdust firing (see Plate X) because I responded to the warmth and softness of the burnished black surface. I saw potential in the quality of drawing back into the surface after it was burnished to create pattern. The black on black ware of Maria Martinez was an inspiration for my attempt at this process (see Plate IX).

I burnished the bone dry pot after systematically brushing on Jordan Terrasigellala. Then to create a contrast, I drew back into the pot with a needle tool. The pot was placed in a trash can and then packed with fine sawdust. After sealing the lid on with clay, I fired it slowly, just piloting overnight, in an updraft gas kiln to maturity, c/04.

The results were as follows: the color was a soft black, as I had hoped. On the bottom of each piece fired, dime shaped discs of clay, maybe 20 to 30 of them, popped off. Identical results occurred in two different firings.

(2) Garbage Firing in the Wood Kiln

I chose woodfiring (see Plate XI) in another attempt to create surface color through a firing process. I responded to the color variation achieved by flashing in conjunction with the use of combustibles.

I loaded my bisque into the wood kiln, then packed garbage such as salt-soaked straw, cattails, grasses and dog food, in and around each pot. The kiln was fired to maturity during which time it was

intermittently put into reduction.

The color range was beautiful. It included blues and greens from the trace metals in dog food. All work in this firing cracked. The reason I believe, was because I fired it too quickly in the beginning.

(3) Sandblasting

I first approached the sandblaster in search of an alternative to sawdust firing. I hoped to imitate the qualities of black on black ware (see Plate XII).

I glazed the entire piece with Duncan Black Luster Glaze #611. After firing to maturity, c/06, I masked off areas of the piece by drawing on it with masking tape. The pot was then sandblasted using a fine grit silica sand under low pressure in a cross hatch pattern. I sandblasted just long enough to dull the bright glaze not enough to cut down to the body.

The result was similar to the sawdust fired pots although the sandblasted one lacked in warmth. I responded to the subtlety of the patterning and the ability to draw on a "finished" glazed piece.

On the next piece I played off that quality of the sandblaster to dull a bright glaze. Body parts of the dog were restated and created by using subtle positive and negative triangular patterns, once again dealing with 2D/3D ambiguity (see Plate XIII).

Another quality of the sandblaster is the ability to cut back into the body through the glaze. By first masking off areas of the glazed piece, then by using coarse silicon carbide grit and increased pressure I was able to give the decoration physical depth (see Plate XIV and Plate XV).

On this first deeply blasted dog I masked off a square tile pattern around the lip and dog images on the chest. I then blasted down approximately 1/16" giving the illusion that the remaining glazed areas were glued on, as opposed to the reality that everything else was eroded away.

When I checked the piece to see if the blasting was even, I noticed parts where the glaze was not totally removed. Not only could I draw with the masking tape before blasting, I discovered I could draw with the sandblaster.

The surface decoration of this piece had little to do with the form. Some sections of the pot were in high relief, tile-like, other areas were left partially eroded with drawn-on blasted lines.

The next step was to decorate the dog form as a dog, in order to unify the form and surface. I brought together those qualities that I discovered in the preceding works in this new piece (see Plate XVI).

This process was as follows: a fur-like pattern was masked off on a yellow glazed dog pot. I blasted some areas very deeply, up to 1/8" deep, other sections were blasted lightly then masked again to give variation in the patterning, and in addition I simply drew on the pot with the sandblaster without masking at all.

At this point I discovered that I could control the degree of erosion by controlling certain variables; the grit size, the pressure, the distance from the pot that I hold the nozzle, and the time blasting. I attempted to create a rich surface using layers of different colored commercial slips under a gloss glaze (see Plate XVII, Plate XVIII and Plate XIX).

The process was as follows: Duncan brand covercoat blue, black, then yellow were layered over the bisqued terracotta body then fired to c/020. A commercial bright brown gloss glaze was applied and then the pot was fired to maturity c/06. A pattern was masked then the piece was blasted to reveal some of the colors below. Additional areas were masked to preserve the areas of interest. I then blasted again, using the sandblaster as a drawing tool to discriminately reveal underlying color.

In summary, sandblasting has changed my attitude as to when a piece is finished. The glaze firing was previously the final process, now it is the beginning for my surface decoration. The sandblaster was the logical progression from using wet newspaper on wet clay to masking tape on a glazed surface.

In a sense, I view sandblasting as I do time-lapse photography. The sense of the passage of time through erosion seems to correlate with the periods of history I allude to in my work.

This thesis is an investigation of the unity of imagery, surface and form. Therefore, this written section was divided into those three categories. I chose to use a vessel form in the image of a dog. I treated the surface of these vessels in a variety of ways.

The strongest pots in my thesis are the ones I pushed the farthest. The pots I cut the most away from, the ones I sandblasted the deepest. In retrospect I feel the "Yellow Reclining Dog Sandblast Dog" most successfully unifies imagery, surface and form.

I plan to continue my investigation of the balance between vessel and figure. More specifically, I intend to employ images other than the dog and explore new directions in surface decoration.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹C.G. Jung, Man and His Symbols (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1964), p. 24.
- ²Elinor Lander Horwitz, Contemporary American Folk Artists (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1975), p. 18.
- ³Ibid., p. 19.
- ⁴Ibid., p. 13.
- ⁵Philip Rawson, Ceramics (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 151.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Plate
Number

- I ⁶Ferdinand Anton, Woman in Pre-Columbian America (New York: Abner Schram, 1973), Fig. 29.
- II ⁷Griselda Lewis, A Picture History of English Pottery (London: Hulton Press, 1956), Fig. 50.
- III ⁸Frederick Hartt, Art A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1976), p. 92.
- IV ⁹Daina L. Johnson, "Boobies, Boojums, and Snarks," American Ceramics, Spring 1982, p. 27.
- V ¹⁰Georges Ramie, Picasso's Ceramics (New Jersey: Chartwell Books Inc., 1974), p. 133.
- VI ¹¹J.J. Brody, Mimbres Painted Pottery (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1977), Plate 8.
- VII ¹²Ibid., p. 164.
- VIII ¹³Griselda Lewis, A Collector's History of English Pottery (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1969), p. 22.
- IX ¹⁴Susan Peterson, The Living Tradition of Maria Martinez (Tokyo, New York and San Francisco: Kodansha International Ltd., 1977), P. 256.

ILLUSTRATIONS
(cont'd)Plate
Number

- X 1⁵photo credit to Paul Pasquarello, Buffalo, New York.
- XI 1⁶Ibid.
- XII 1_{xy}⁷Ibid.
- XIII 1⁸Ibid.
- XIV 1⁹Ibid.
- XV 2⁰Ibid.
- XVI 2¹Ibid.
- XVII 2²Ibid.
- XVIII 2³Ibid.
- XIX 2⁴Ibid.

ILLUSTRATIONS

















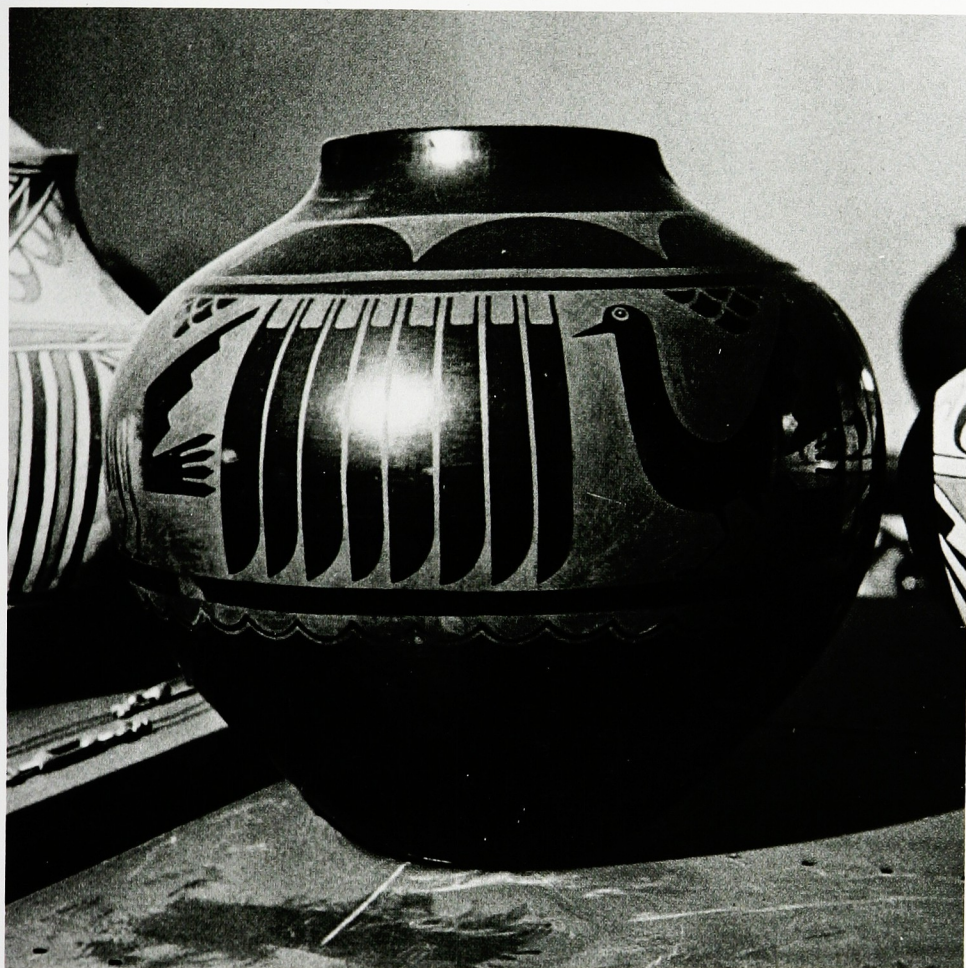




Plate X



Plate XI



Plate XII



Plate XIII

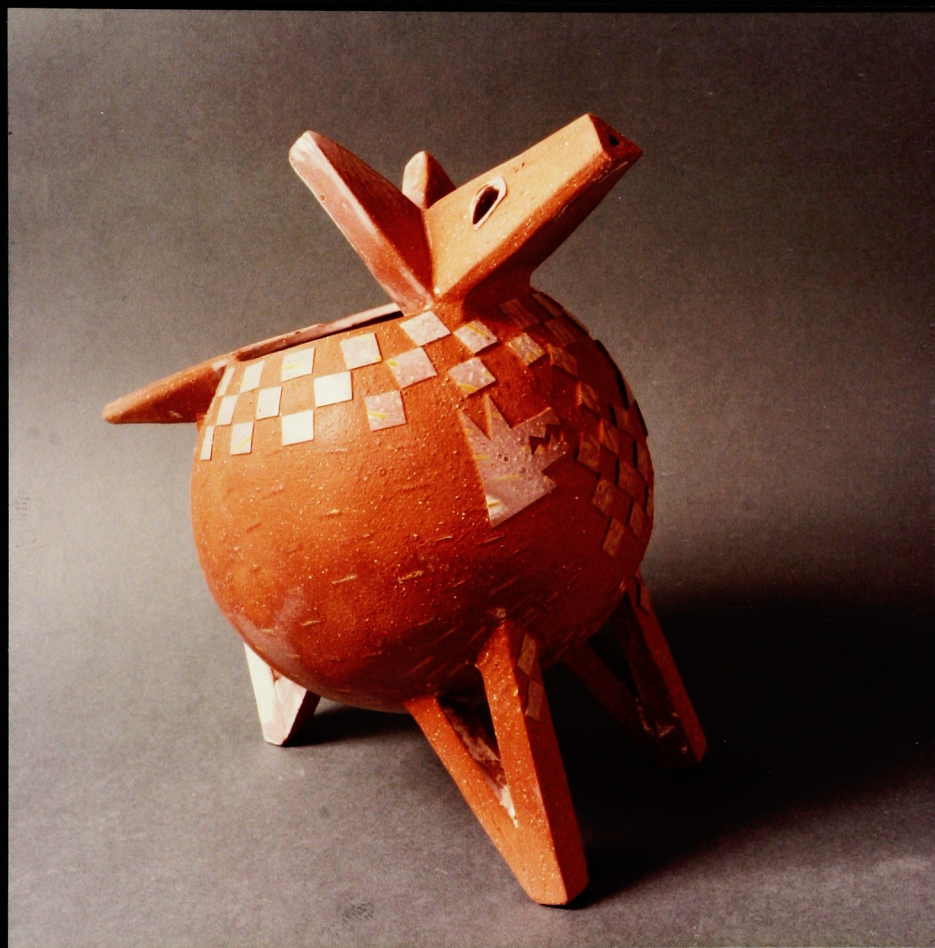


Plate XIV



Plate XV



Plate XVI



Plate XVII

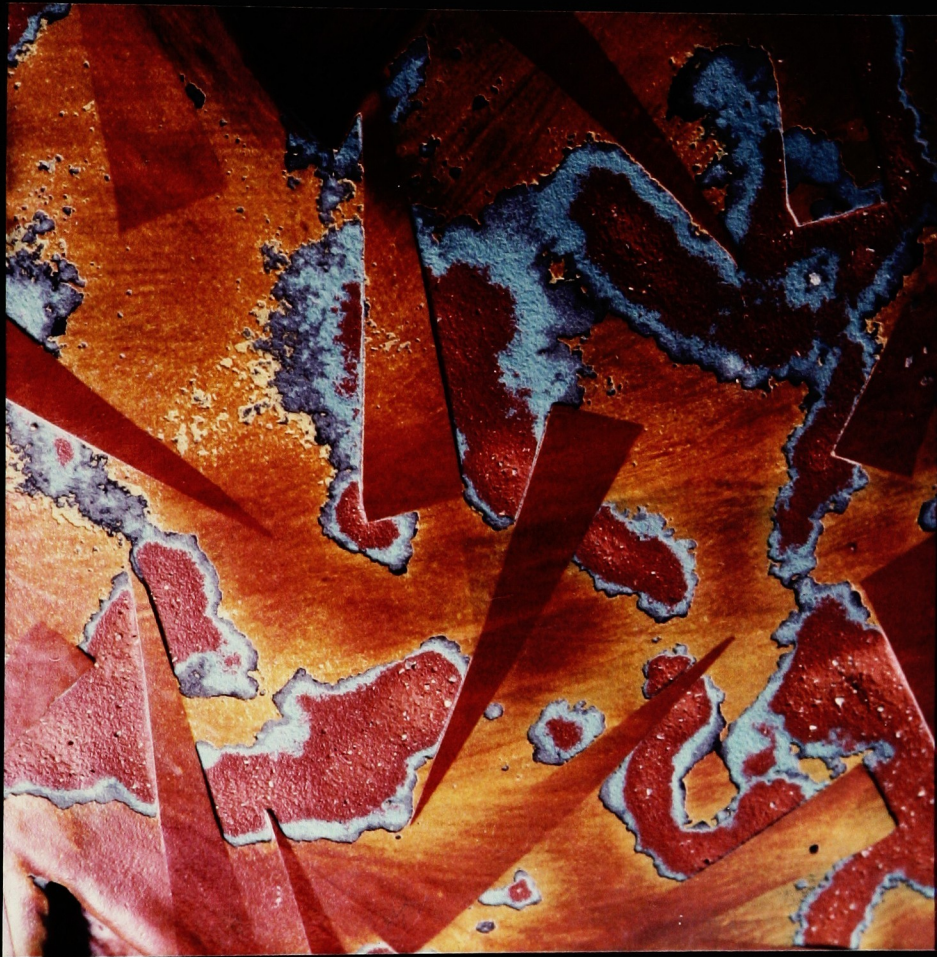


Plate XVIII



Plate XIX

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